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Geographical Testimony: A Short History of a Yugoslav Family

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Abstract

I attempt in this essay to travel outside of and beyond the more spectacular or established geopolitical discourses associated with research on post-conflict regions, and follow instead the trail of another more essential or everyday history and geography. Listening to and responding to the testimony of a single Yugoslav family, I draw from and write of memories of former places, initially returning to the traumatic moments of 1992, and a journey across Europe. In so doing I reflect upon the use of testimony in geographical writing, positioning it as an inherently geographical psychoanalytic technique, which not only eases suffering in individuals and communities, but offers new possibilities for societal change and transitional justice in post-conflict regions.

Keywords

Testimony, Place, War, Trauma, Yugoslavia, Bosnia

You hear sounds amid the din, the rhythm of the bus, its thick window knocking. Through the glass you notice – people, scenes, aspects – that will become, much later, ten years on perhaps, the more or less familiar images of your homeland. Such things you will describe with fervour and exaggeration to strangers from other countries.

Miljenko Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*

Introduction: *I was a Refugee*

Refugees waiting at a transit point in a borderland, or remaining exiled in a foreign country, are a striking stillness in a mobile world. It is during this forced waiting that revealing and unexpected encounters occur, shining an intense light on the notion of a fixed, immovable, everlasting statehood and, a singular, pure ethnicity or nationality (see Nancy 2000). Traumatic, stop-start, wait-go: the stuttering journeys made by refugees portray the darker side of travel, transportation, mobility, and can lead to a permanent sense of statelessness, and the loss or deconstruction of a perceived or imagined identity (see Anderson 1983).

When making a journey – whether a mundane trip to work or a lauded expedition into the wilderness – there is normally an expectation of a return trip in the near future, and a way back to what is designated home. The journeys of refugees act in contradistinction to the Romantic Grand Tours undertaken by poets and writers, or the ethnographic excursions of archaeologists, historians, anthropologists and geographers. They are precisely what Michael Taussig (2006) could have termed non-pilgrimage, whilst tracing Walter Benjamin's final journey. In September 1940, on his way out of France, Benjamin reached the Spanish border. As Taussig recounts, at the time many refugees were jittery with the idea of staying in France

and paralysed with fear at the idea of leaving. If they decided to leave, they carried in their pockets vials of poison, just in case the worst should happen and they were captured. Benjamin's suicide was for this reason by no means unique. Taking a massive overdose of morphine tablets, he died in one of the most beautiful places Hannah Arendt had ever seen, a place called Portbou. As I read of the failed border crossing, the story of Benjamin's death seemed to me to overwhelm not only his own life, but other less familiar lives, the lives of the not so well-known refugees who had made a similar journey and who perhaps now remain in exile.

To the east of where Walter Benjamin hoped to make his escape during World War II, trains of humans have again been seen on European soil in the past year. Traipsing north in search of refuge, through what became known as *the Balkan Corridor*, many were and still are fleeing war in the Middle East. While governments in the Balkans and its northern periphery adopted strict border policies, the people of the former Yugoslavia – a country which made up a large part of the Balkan Peninsula – reminded of their own difficult recent history, reacted differently. In a show of solidarity with those making the perilous journey north, dodging water cannons and barbed wire fences, locals made maps highlighting minefields, provided shelter and aid, and daubed a slogan all over: *I was a refugee*. The ordeal of adults and children, waiting to be processed at the border between Croatia and Slovenia, brought back traumatic memories for those who had made a similar journey, roughly twenty years earlier.

“As a Yugoslav, I mourn,” said Dino, a refugee who reached Blackburn, northwest England in late 1992, after escaping a war that had engulfed his homeland. Nine years old at the time, Dino and his family left Yugoslavia along with many others, travelling north in the hope of refuge. It was the 22nd of April 1992 when they set off on their journey, leaving

behind a by then war-torn and barely recognisable Yugoslavia, weeks after the war in Bosnia had begun. In the brutal years that followed their safe passage, citizens were continuously displaced as a result of what was called ethnic cleansing, a nationalist passion which made possible heinous war criminality, the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica, mass murder not seen on the continent since World War II, and the deaths of over 100,000 people.

It is common to create a certain historical and geopolitical narrative in order to write of the ethnic wars that brought an end to Yugoslavia (see Toal 1996). Some scholarship draws on either ethnographic field data collected to explore state-building and post-conflict reconstruction (see e.g., Jeffrey 2006), or, through a form of discourse analysis, interrogates the loss or dispossession of identity, deconstructing the internal skirmishes of ethnic and identitarian debate (see e.g., Campbell 1998). Drifting somewhat against the more established geopolitical discourses associated with research on the collapse of Yugoslavia (see Glenny 1992, Thompson 1992, Rieff 1995, Little and Silber 1996, Campbell 1998), the post-socialist transition era after Yugoslavia (see Arsenijević 2011, 2014, Toal and Dahlman 2011, Jeffrey 2012, Horvat and Štiks 2015), and the Balkans more widely (see Carter 1977, Todorova 1997, Goldsworthy 1998, Glenny 1999, Žižek 2000, Mazower 2002), this essay attempts to follow instead the trail of another, more essential or everyday history and geography (see de Certeau 1984, Holloway and Hubbard 2000, Bennett and Watson 2002, Scott 2009).

Listening to and responding to the testimony of a single Yugoslav family, I draw from and write of their memories of former places, initially picking up their story in 1992, as they travelled across Europe, fleeing the war in Bosnia. The narrative produced locates a sometimes traumatic past, focusing on the small, incidental, and accidental, speaking to a form of embodied, mobile, non-representational geography that has emerged in the past decade and a half (see e.g., Dubow 2001, 2011, Wylie 2002, 2005, Edensor 2005, 2008,

Daniels 2006, 2012, Lorimer 2006, 2012, Pearson 2006, DeSilvey 2007, 2010, 2012, Matless 2008, 2010, Lorimer and Wylie 2010, Rose 2012, Riding 2015a, 2015b, 2016a). In so doing, the essay places, describes and reflects upon the use of testimony in geographical writing – informing, grounding, and locating a nascent psychoanalytic geography (see e.g., Pile 1991, 1996, Bondi 1999, Nast 2000, Callard 2003, Philo and Parr 2003, Kingsbury 2004, Kingsbury and Pile 2014) – positioning testimony as an inherently geographic psychoanalytic technique, which not only eases suffering in individuals and communities, but offers new possibilities for societal change and transitional justice in post-conflict regions.

Part one: a refugee journey

Dino remembers first coming to England. He remembers lots of people and crowds of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. The children were playing but they were aware something was not right, as they travelled on a bus across Europe. Even at his young age, Dino could sense an atmosphere of anxiety amongst the adults. “It was a journey into the unknown,” said Dino. From a child’s point of view, from Dino’s point of view, it was all a mystery. He remembers only having the clothes he was wearing. They had some bags, but not many, and nothing of any value or significance was in their baggage as far as Dino can remember. He received a football in Slovenia but was unable to take it to England. So there was, Dino reiterates, “Nothing of significance in their luggage.”

Dino’s mother, Zekija, explains why. She had never thought about coming to England before 1992. Not once before the war did she think about going somewhere else, especially somewhere on the other side of Europe. She left their home in Novi Travnik, a new town in central Bosnia, because she felt unsafe and did not want her children to see any violence. They initially went to Velenje in Slovenia, Zekija and her two boys, where they stayed for

almost six months, in the hope that they would soon be able go back home. Every time Zekija spoke to her husband, Hamdija, who stayed behind in Novi Travnik, she always asked, “When can we come back?” Hamdija though never had an answer to that question.

They left their apartment in Novi Travnik in April 1992. By September, Dino and his older brother Emin were ready to go back to school, but there was no room for them. “There were so many refugees,” Zekija repeated. “They couldn’t accommodate all of us,” she said. Responding to the humanitarian crisis, British aid-workers from the *Red Cross* had travelled to Velenje, and offered to take the family to England. “It was such a hard decision,” Zekija said. She just couldn’t decide what to do, as she still wanted to go back home. Two weeks passed, and at the last minute, just a day before the final bus was ready to leave, she said to her two boys, “We have to go.” The *Red Cross* aid-workers said to her, “You are only allowed to stay in England for six months until the war is over.” Zekija thought fine, for six months, the children are still young, at least they can learn English. “I didn’t think about myself,” she said.

They came by bus, about forty people altogether, mostly families. Zekija came with just her children. Her husband, Hamdija, whom she feared she would never see again, remained at home in Novi Travnik. Dover is the first place Zekija remembers in England. She remembers arriving in Dover and going to the immigration office. There the refugees had to fill out forms and photographs were taken. Zekija had her passport, but most of the passengers had no documents. It was the 13th September 1992. They remember that night well. All of the refugees were gathered together in one place. The *Red Cross* aid-workers said, “Because there are so many families, so many refugees, you will have to go to whichever place in England can accommodate you.” “So that’s how we started,” said Zekija. Some of the refugees were moved to London, and some to Manchester. Zekija and her two

children, Dino and Emin, were taken to a cotton town in the north of England, called Blackburn.

Zekija felt lonely at this time. The children went straight to school and Zekija went to English classes, as at that time she could only say a few words. But she could not concentrate at all. She does not remember learning anything. Dino remembers quite a lot from this time. He remembers his English teacher in particular and school friends. He remembers day trips to the theme park Camelot and to the seaside town Blackpool, Morrison's supermarket, the local fish and chip shop where he played on an arcade machine, and a football pitch. They lived very close to the school, just around the corner, in the shadow of the football stadium. From time to time in Blackburn, Zekija would be able to phone her husband Hamdija. Zekija's first question was, "When can we come home?" It was always her first question. The answer from Hamdija was always, "You can't come back home, you have to just wait."

Zekija finally returned to Novi Travnik for the first time in 1997, with her two boys, Dino and Emin, almost five years after they had travelled across Europe, and more than five years since they had been home. "It was a strange experience, going back," said Zekija. The first time she went back, she just couldn't recognise any places. Abandoned houses lined ruined roads, which made it difficult for them to travel. And every place, every house, every single road had been marked and they could see there had been a war. "I cannot even think that I saw even one building that was like it used to be," said Zekija. Zekija still remembers that day vividly. "Seeing their home again was so emotional," she said. "We used to live in an apartment and when I went there I couldn't go there because my flat was occupied," Zekija said.

"So going back wasn't celebratory, it wasn't a fantastic experience, it was an odd experience," said Dino. Yes he was going back home, but there was no home, physically

there was no home, as it was occupied by someone else. The home that he was brought up in was a few yards away but he couldn't go there. "We could not go to see it, and that was tough, but I don't think it was as tough for me as it was for my mum," Dino said. According to Zekija they were told, "Yes you can go to see your place but somebody else lives there, it is yours, it still belongs to you, but no thing will be there that will remember you have ever lived there."

Zekija still thinks about their old apartment from time to time. "When you lost everything overnight, you are always thinking about that," she said. Out of all of the things inside the apartment Zekija said, "It would be nice to have photographs, just because of memories." They do not have even a single image of their old home. She can still remember it though, the inside of the apartment, she still has her memories of the place, as does Dino, who said, "The place where we lived, the place where we couldn't go, that's my home forever." When they went back for the first time after the war, they all stood outside the apartment block and looked at it for a while. It was exactly the same, as far as Dino remembers. It was damaged but that didn't matter to him, as it was his home. He remembers it being much smaller than when he left it, so the playground in front, he described with his hands, "Was this big and not that big."

Part two: a former home

Novi Travnik was, according to Hamdija, a symbol of Yugoslavia, you could say, "A little Yugoslavia." Located in a remote valley twenty kilometres from historic Travnik, Novi Travnik was created in 1949 to house the workers of a new armaments factory called Bratstvo, which at its height employed over ten thousand people. The standard of living in the town was high, cultural and sporting life was thriving, and ethnic togetherness seemed to be

constant. “It was an example to follow for the whole of Yugoslavia,” said Hamdija. Newlyweds Hamdija and Zekija were not well paid when they first moved to the town but they were really happy. It was 1979.

When they first arrived everything was new, everything was planned. Hamdija thought it was the nicest place he had seen in the whole of Yugoslavia. That’s one of the reasons he decided to stay. He didn’t know where he’d end up once he finished his studies in Sarajevo, but he chose ‘new’ Travnik because “physically it was beautiful.” He remembers a big billboard, a massive billboard, as you arrived at the entrance of the town, which said on it: *Welcome to the Town of Youth*. “There was always development, constant development, from 1981 to 1991, nonstop building,” said Hamdija. Most of the larger buildings in the town, the big structures, were made between 1981 and 1991. According to Hamdija because there was economic growth in the town there was also physical growth. He used to joke that if you were to stand outside Bratstvo on pay day as the workers streamed out, “You could literally sell stones.”

Zekija thought it was an amazing place, a really lovely new town. There were parks and trees planted along the streets. People came from all over the former Yugoslavia to work there. They had been offered a job in the factory, and they had accommodation provided in the rows of apartment blocks that made up the town. Zekija got a job working in the town hall as a finance officer. At the weekends when Hamdija and Zekija were off work, they were hardly ever at home. They were always out meeting new people, new friends. They would have a little barbeque and play basketball nearly every weekend. So those years were the happiest of their lives, “Until 1991, the best, and then began the catastrophe.”

“It spread so quickly, unbelievable, as a fire,” said Zekija. An aeroplane, a low flying fighter jet, belonging to the Yugoslav National Army shocked the town. It flew so low that

people on the ground could see the pilot. The jet broke the sound barrier as it went by, smashing the windows throughout Novi Travnik and shaking the buildings. “To create fear was exactly what they wanted,” said Zekija, “To make people think that a war is coming and everybody should leave.” It still did not make sense to Hamdija though because it was a plane flown by an army that he was an officer in. In that moment, though, he understood that there was a threat coming, but it still did not make logical sense. An old friend said to Hamdija, “Make sure your children and your family leave.” Velenje in Slovenia was made a brother town to Novi Travnik in Tito’s socialist Yugoslavia. So Zekija took her two boys, Dino and Emin to Velenje in 1992 on a bus, along with many others from Novi Travnik.

Hamdija knew trouble was coming but what actually happened was nowhere near what he thought was going to happen. “Anarchy literally just arrived at the doorstep, propaganda was too powerful, too well orchestrated,” said Hamdija. Most of the town was destroyed during the war physically. Three big skyscrapers collapsed. But the biggest amount of damage done was to the factory. In 1992, twelve Yugoslav National Army fighter jets targeted the factory, destroying large parts of the production complex. The attack, planned in the former capital of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, left the symbolic Yugoslav factory in ruins. “The pilots themselves knew exactly what they were bombing,” said Hamdija.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1. Inside the Bratstvo factory, Novi Travnik: 30/11/2015. Source: Author.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2. Outside the Bratstvo factory, Novi Travnik: 30/11/2015. Source: Author.

When the war started Hamdija thought “he was in a dream” because he couldn’t believe what was happening day after day. That was the beginning and later, “It became

unbearable,” said Hamdija. He remained in the apartment alone for a very long time. Hamdija was by then defined by others as a Bosniak, and was living in what had become the Croat side of town. He realised in the end that his life was hanging by a thread and left late one evening. At any time while he was there, nationalists could have come in wearing their distinctive balaclavas and killed him.

Now when Hamdija looks at Novi Travnik he sees “a town of death,” “a town of absolute catastrophe.” “There are no jobs, corruption is rife, there is no system, and nothing is functioning,” said Hamdija. He just goes back to see friends. “The people have changed, they’re unhappy, they’re on edge, they are just existing,” said Hamdija. He went on to say, “There’s no prosperity, no future, and everyone wants to leave.” Hamdija goes back to see very dear friends but it’s too sad to stay. The new generation who were born in 1995 are now twenty years of age. “They are almost looking to the future, so that is a positive thing,” said Hamdija. But for Hamdija it is difficult to be positive because he has a saying, “Somebody stole twenty years of his life.”

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3. The now closed Hotel Novi Travnik: 08/03/2014. Source: Author.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Figure 4. Garages in Novi Travnik: 08/03/2014. Source: Author.

Whenever Zekija goes back she only ever stays for a day or two. She always feels depressed there, remembering what it was like before the war. For her it is a very depressing place. “There’s nothing there, literally nothing,” said Zekija. She doesn’t know what people do all day. “Surviving I suppose,” she went on to say. Zekija would not go back at all if she had a choice, but she has to see her old friends who still live in Novi Travnik. “They are just

living, getting on with their lives, they have to be there, they haven't got a choice," said Zekija. For their friends in Novi Travnik it is always nice when Zekija goes back, and they talk about the past. "But that is only memories isn't it," Zekija said.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Figure 5. Apartments in Novi Travnik: 08/03/2014. Source: Author.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Figure 6. Bosniak Graffiti in Novi Travnik: 08/03/2014. Source: Author.

Part three: former in the present

Tito's grave sits on a hill overlooking Belgrade, in the middle of a former winter garden, *The House of Flowers*, where Tito spent the last three years of his life. It is one of the most important places of remembrance related to the former Yugoslavia. The messages left there by former Yugoslav citizens are written in what is essentially a condolence book. As such, Tito's grave has become a place for people to mourn the death of a country, and a place from which to send messages of condolence not only to father Tito, Yugoslavia's iconic leader, but to Yugoslavia itself. Citizens travel to Tito's grave to remember Yugoslavia and to mourn its collapse, as for many the ethno-nationalist neoliberal 'transition' era after Yugoslavia has meant general impoverishment, de-industrialisation, diminished democracy, and mass unemployment (see Bieber 2006, Arsenijević 2011, 2014, Toal and Dahlman 2011, Jeffrey 2012, Helms 2013, Gordy 2015, Horvat and Štiks 2015, Hromadžić 2015, Jansen 2015, Kurtović 2015, Mujkić 2015, Riding 2015b, 2016b).

The messages and other forms of remembrance can be read together as a collective remembering of Yugoslavia, creating and maintaining a memory of the former country. The socialist past is here remembered fondly, constructed in *The House of Flowers* as a better time, a time when the country was united and society was formed through a state rhetoric of social justice and the rights of workers. In effect, the condolence book and other memorial objects reveal a common sense of loss that citizens now feel in the former Yugoslavia, a Yugo-nostalgia (see Luthar and Puznik 2010). Indeed many citizens in the successor states that emerged after Yugoslavia mourn a forgotten socialist future, as such they feel former in the present, a definition of trauma (see Arsenijević 2010). For this reason Zekija is sure her generation would all say, “They would like to go back and live in Yugoslavia.” “Younger generation they don’t know because they didn’t live there,” she said. Zekija is trying to forget. “Of course you can’t forget,” she said. But she is trying to think of Yugoslavia as the past. “I have to live in the future, I have to live in the future,” said Zekija.

Yet for most of Zekija’s life she lived in Yugoslavia. Zekija was born after World War II, in 1956, in Kladanj, Yugoslavia. She went to school there and remembers the Partisan films they used to get shown about the fight against fascism, the supreme value on which the former country was founded. “The time when socialism was there we were all kind of on the same level, you did not have somebody very rich, somebody very poor, we were all kind of in the middle class families, and we did feel all the same,” said Zekija. Zekija’s personal opinion is that she never ever thought that anything could happen to Yugoslavia. A person might have been Serbian and Croatian, or Bosnian and Serbian, so Zekija said, thinking about what happened in the 1990s, “How could you separate somebody?”

Dino can remember Yugoslavia. One thing he can remember is the flag, the red, the white, and the blue with a star in the middle. He remembers the songs, the pop songs. He still

hears them now. He remembers those little things. Dino became one of Tito's little pioneers. "A little gimmick, where you'd get a hat and a red star," he said. "That gave you an identity, you're a Yugoslav," Dino declared. That was when he was very young, and it instilled in him a sense of patriotism. Even now when he sees the flag, the Yugoslav flag, he looks at it and he feels as if it is his flag. For Dino, seeing the Yugoslav flag makes him remember that "Yugoslavia is where he is from," and "Yugoslavia is his country."

Yet when people ask Dino where he is from it is a very difficult question for him to answer. "I can't say I'm English, I can say I'm British to a certain extent, I say I'm British to people who are from America for example," said Dino. If they are good friends he will tell them where he is really from, but if they're acquaintances he will say he is British, "Because giving them information on my true heritage is a very personal thing," said Dino. It is difficult for Dino to explain where he is from as Dino was born in Yugoslavia, he is from Yugoslavia, but it does not exist anymore, therefore his identity does not exist. So he can no longer be, in the eyes of the world, a Yugoslav. In the absence of this geopolitical fact – the absence of a Yugoslavia – Dino's national identity, as such, lives on wholly in the imaginary (see Anderson 1983). However resettled he may have become, the being of a refugee is a way of making his identity legitimate, as legitimate as any flag, home office, or parliament. To be a refugee is a non-identity, a failure of identity, a losing of an identity, yet being a refugee, and claiming asylum as a Yugoslav, enables his identity to exist into the future. Dino would like to go back home to Novi Travnik but at present it is for him impossible. "It's not Yugoslavia," said Dino.

Conclusion: a new approach to Yugoslav Studies

To ease suffering and to open new possibilities for change in individuals and communities who have experienced psychic trauma, there is a need to tell others of that traumatic history. If the traumatic past is not fully interrogated, the traumatic event itself cannot become a “narrative memory” and be integrated into a story of the past. The speaking of trauma, giving voice to the incidents and accidents of the everyday and representing a traumatic life may well be a form of recovery. Telling someone about the past seems to be – and is certainly – for many survivors a way of stilling and surviving the recurrence of traumatic haunting (see Caruth 1995). As Laub notes, “Survivors do not only need to survive to tell their stories; they also need to tell their stories in order to survive” (1995, p. 63). Likewise, “Our memory repeats to us what we have not yet come to terms with; what still haunts us” (Erikson 1995, p. 184).

In the process of attempting to represent a traumatic past, talking in detail about seemingly incidental moments, and remembering the little details of a place – a location, an apartment, or a bus journey – enables a series of associative memories to occur. In Freud’s early writings on trauma, this form of what could be called a “geographical testimony” is specifically seen as a way to allow a traumatic event to be “forgotten”. For this reason, telling and re-telling a life-story may be a part of the cure, the giving-up of an important reality, or for a psychoanalyst, “the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy” (Caruth 1995, p. vii).

Since the collapse of Yugoslavia, research in post-conflict regions has begun to recognise the necessity of testimony – listening to and responding to traumatic stories – as a means to alleviate suffering. Yet when undergoing psychoanalysis there is always a certain inaccessibility – the inaccessibility of trauma to be simply located, dated, or even understood

by those who were not there. Though through different modes of encounter, and in learning more about the traumatic reaction to past violent events, it is possible to open in the individual and the community new possibilities for change. Here it is possible through the psychoanalytic practice, testimony, to speak out about a crisis in the former Yugoslavia that, as trauma necessarily yet persists, is not over. Twenty years after Srebrenica, as this account demonstrates, there is still a necessity for research which aims to understand and alleviate psychic trauma in the former Yugoslavia. Yet “the difficulty of listening to and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, remains a problem” (Caruth 1995, p. vii).

When attempting to write of the collapse of Yugoslavia, for Dino, it is important to understand that, in his words, “The war has had an impact physically and psychologically.” The psychological part is the most painful for Dino to discuss. Because having been back recently, Dino noticed that,

The buildings have been repaired, Sarajevo for example, it looks beautiful, but people sit in coffee shops and they still talk about the war, they still talk about having someone in their class who is Muslim, or Serbian, people still talk about the political past which has an effect in the present.

He continued, “On the outside when you go to visit the country, you’ll see the wonderful food, lots of wonderful people but when you spend time with them and you dig deep it’s tragic, it’s absolutely tragic.” Dino thinks it will take a very long time, two generations at least, not to fix but to overcome the recent past. “The country has been completely raped if you will and one of the worse things about something like this happening is that you don’t know who to blame,” said Dino. “Those people have suffered, my friends and family, they have suffered, and I will never understand it,” Dino concluded.

After a few moments Dino said, “Always yes I think about Yugoslavia, and not being able to grow up there, not always consciously, sometimes subconsciously, and I always think what would have happened if there was no war, where would I be?” Zekija wonders where she would be too. The thing that hurts Zekija the most is when people say to her, “Are you happy to live in England?” Or, “Is it better for you to live in England than back home?” “How can I tell you if it is better?” Zekija said. “When you are going somewhere and you are a refugee, how would you feel? It is not easy,” said Zekija. That was the hardest time of her life, hearing someone say, “Are you a refugee?” “This was so hurtful,” Zekija said loudly. Everybody said to them, “Refugee, refugee, refugee.”

As this essay seeks to demonstrate, it is often the small, discrete, and apparently unimportant things that bear the most psychic weight, that imprison most pain. Humans live, and survive, in stories, in fragments of stories, and not the grand narratives of the historic record. When retelling and locating the trivial and ostensibly irrelevant details and moments of a traumatic past, a therapeutic intervention becomes meaningful. As has been voiced elsewhere, this psychoanalytic form of storytelling is necessarily of and in the world, it is necessarily geographical as trauma is to a greater or lesser extent located and placed (see e.g., Pile 1991, 1996, Bondi 1999, Nast 2000, Callard 2003, Philo and Parr 2003, Kingsbury 2004, Kingsbury and Pile 2014). Via the transference of a geographical testimony it is possible to ease intense personal suffering and offer new possibilities for change in post-conflict communities. A change that would as this essay contends – like every storyteller following Walter Benjamin (2016) – acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness, in order to invest in the possibility of a just future after conflict.

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Figures

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Figure 3. The now closed Hotel Novi Travnik: 08/03/2014. Source: Author.

Figure 4. Garages in Novi Travnik: 08/03/2014. Source: Author.

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Figure 6. Bosniak Graffiti in Novi Travnik: 08/03/2014. Source: Author.